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Introduction to New Work in Holocaust Studies

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Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek,
"Introduction to New Work in Holocaust Studies"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/1>>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.1 (2009)
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/>>
Thematic Issue *New Work in Holocaust Studies*
Edited by Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek

Louise O. VASVÁRI and Steven TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK

Introduction to *New Work in Holocaust Studies*

Much of the most interesting scholarship in Holocaust Studies in the last decade(s) attempts to avoid narrow disciplinary approaches and to take a broader one centered in cultural studies, highlighting the problematics of representation through a variety of discourses. No longer privileging historical discourse, this work ranges from life writing (itself encompassing from oral testimony, to memoirs, to diaries, and more), to fictional and documentary films, (auto)fictional writing, plays, and poems (both by survivors as well as by proxy witnesses), the plastic arts, as well as the construction of monuments. We can see the wide variety of genres of scholarship in any bibliography of Holocaust Studies where important publications show the recurring keywords of trauma, memory, and witnessing paired with terms to describe the demands of Holocaust representation such as aesthetics, realism, (re)writing, discourse, and national narratives versus individual memory, speaking the unspeakable, and so on.

An other related concern that still continues to occupy a place of honor in studies dealing with issues of representations of the Holocaust is Theodore Adorno's famous, oft-contested and now repudiated dictum of the unrepresentability of the Holocaust, stated most aphoristically in his 1949 injunction, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," which he himself later came to retract in part. As a number of scholars suggest, while the Holocaust may be considered incomprehensible and thus unspeakable, representation is not insurmountable as long as it reflects an ethical framework; indeed representation is necessary, for the Holocaust would otherwise soon die with the imminent death of the last survivors. Susan Gubar notes the danger of policing creative responses and of the importance of art in preserving memory, but at the same time she warns of the danger of multiplying images of genocide into banality. She concludes that whatever Adorno's intention in his radical questioning of aesthetic response he was more to inspire than to deter poets. The difficult balance in achieving such an ethical framework and to refrain from banality, melodrama, and even potentially Holocaust porn has most recently been exemplified in the controversy around the almost 1000-page long novel by the Jonathan Littell, written in French and published in French in 2006, *Les Bienveillantes* and translated to English as *The Kindly Ones*. While it was hailed by *Le Nouvel Observateur* as a new *War and Peace*, it has been more cogently described by Michiko Kakutani as rationalizing the horrors of Auschwitz through the narrative of the grotesque sexually sadistic fantasies of a perpetrator, all of which serves to illustrate for Kakutani how drastically literally representations of the holocaust have changed. Particularly useful in regard to the question of the ethics and aesthetics of Holocaust representation is Brett Ashley Kaplan's *Unwanted Beauty: Aesthetic Pleasure in Holocaust Representation*, one of the most recent of the series of studies representing a new cultural turn in the analysis of Holocaust (1-3). Kaplan raises questions about how to make sense of the contradictory claims of aesthetics and history and of the often ambiguous representations that can enhance Holocaust remembrance. He also points out an important fact that on its own negates the merits of Adorno's dictum: that aesthetic pleasure provided a survival mechanism in the concentration camps as well as for those who wrote soon after liberation, while for those who wrote decades later it served as a means of catalyzing holocaust memory.

The present collection of studies in the thematic issue *New Work in Holocaust Studies* of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/>> serves to raise and to illustrate many of the same issues central to cultural studies of the Holocaust sketched briefly above. At the same time, it also functions as a parallel to its companion volume, published as *Comparative Central European Holocaust Studies* (see Vasvári and Tötösy de Zepetnek). In that volume the authors, several of whom are also represented here, concentrate, as the title indicates, on issues pertaining specifically to Central Europe. At the same time, work presented here represents the continual thematic interrelationship of the two volumes of studies. The articles published here can be divided into three subdivisions. The first article by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth on the Hungarian poet Radnóti -- "Visions of Catastrophe in the Poetry of Miklós Radnóti" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/2>> -- serves as a prologue, as it were, to the collection. The main group of seven articles, all deal with the testimony of those who were direct survivors of the Holocaust, while the last article, serving as a coda and representing the future deals with the work of two Israeli authors who were themselves not survivors. Radnóti's foresight of the destruction and mass murder compelled him to witness an chronicle both that dark future and his own death. He succeeded in transforming the horrors of the war and even of his own death -- in his last poem, pre-

dicting his own death, he assumes the voice of the dead -- "shot in the neck ... blood mixed with mud was drying on my ear." His poetry alone should be justification enough for poetry as both testimony and aesthetic pleasure that can outlive the Holocaust.

Elizabeth Scheiber's article "Figurative Language in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/3>> foregrounds how Charlotte Delbo, writing as early as 1945, in her attempt to bear witness goes way beyond testimony and witnessing, creating images at the same time horrible in content and beautiful in poetic construction to produce the pictures she sees in her mind of what she calls "deep memory." Delbo succeeds in describing grotesque images such as cold, hunger, and even the smells of diarrhea with haunting lyrics showing the possibility of translating memory into literature. Delbo's importance also resides in her serving as the *porte parole* of a group of over two hundred women in her own convoy, as well as for women prisoners in general. In spite of her own political background, Delbo writes against official memorialization of a mythologized national past of (male) heroism by privileging the suffering in the death camps. In one poem Delbo contrasts the death of war heroes with the interminably slow death of inmates drowned in diarrhea, mud, and blood.

Laia Esteve Quílez and Rosa-Àuria Munté Ramos explore in their article "Autobiography and Fiction in Semprún's Texts" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/4>> aspects of narration in Jorge Semprún's literary work with regard to his experience in the concentration camp. Quílez Esteve and Munté Ramos analyze auto-novelistic mechanisms Semprún employs and reflect on the various meanings of that use by Semprún. Semprún's biographical journey is characterized by a series of experiences which would determine the form and content of his writing. The perception and experience of exile permeates Semprún's pages, the fluctuation of identities which are masked or unmasked within them, or the dissolution of the "I," the scar left by the horror of the concentration camp, all of which stem from his "life history." The relation between writing and life/lives tends to lead to Semprún's literary project to become an act of testimony embedded in what is referred to in scholarship as autobiographical literature.

Menachem Feuer's article "'Mad Laughter' in Federman's *The Twofold Vibration*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/5>> is an analysis about how Federman, like Delbo a survivor a few years her junior, deals with the challenges posed by Adorno against the comic and the grotesque as representations of the Holocaust. Federman was influenced by Beckett, who befriended him and about whom he wrote his doctoral dissertation after having emigrated to the U.S. Considering the Holocaust an obscenity, Federman felt that one cannot write in belle-lettristic style, that pacifies the reader rather than implicating him. He therefore rejected metaphoric style and coined instead the term "laughterature" representing a mode of tragicomic sadness and sad, playful, provocative laughter in which he wrote his autobiographical fiction.

Anne Rothe's article "Narrative Silences Between History and Memory in Schumann's *Being Present: Growing Up in Hitler's Germany*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/6>> needs to be read aside her companion article "The Third Reich and the Holocaust in East German Official Memory" in the volume *Comparative Central European Holocaust Studies* where she explores the ways in which East Germany falsified the Nazi past by suppressing that most Germans were perpetrators, followers, or bystanders rather than fascists or communist resistance fighters, and that the magnitude of Jewish suffering and the status of the Holocaust had been marginalized. Interestingly, Schuman, a gentile bystander, like Federman the survivor, came to the US about the same time and also obtained a PhD and became an academic. One wonders if he would have written a memoir had remained in his native country. His memoir represents a new group of personal accounts of wartime life from points of view bystanders (most of which, like Schumann's, have been written by immigrants to the U.S.) that have as yet not been studied systematically by Holocaust scholars. These texts shed enormous additional light on the contradictory and antagonistic narratives of the Holocaust and Rothe's study is an outstanding contribution to this new aspect in Holocaust studies.

Radnóti, Delbo, Federman, and Semprún were professional writers, and it is primarily professional writers whose works have been critiqued in relation to the use of potentially inappropriate language to represent the Holocaust. Schumann, although a university professor, was not a writer, which is evident in the quality of his prose. He belongs with the group of memoir writers studied by Louise O. Vasvári in her article "Emigrée Central European Women's Holocaust Life Writing" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/7>> and in her "Introduction to and Bibliography of Central European Women's Holocaust Testimonial Literature" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/10>>, where the great majority are also non-professional writers, most of whom wrote only one work. In the first of these articles Vasvári analyzes

voices of women survivors from a gendered perspective in order to provide insights for both Holocaust studies and gender studies. Vasvári considers whether it can be claimed that there is a specifically female style of remembering and of testifying about these traumatic experiences. Vasvári's selection includes the writings of some two dozen Central European emigrée survivors, all native speakers of Hungarian, later writing and publishing in languages of their adopted countries. The first group of women consists of adult survivors who must bear witness in an incompletely mastered foreign language, while those in the second group were children during the time of trauma and no longer speak their first language or speak it only at a basic level. In her analysis, Vasvári highlights translation and gender issues as well as the variety of narrative techniques the authors make use of, some of which overlap with those of oral testimony.

Ilana Rosen's "Exile, Homeland, and Milieu in the Oral Lore of Carpatho-Russian Jews" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/8>> is an analysis of oral narratives of Central and East European Jewish communities. The Jewish people have spent most of their lifetime outside their promised land. Accordingly, their ethos, as reflected by holy teachings, expresses a yearning for a return to the holy land by divine agency once the nation is purified of its sins. In modern times, with the rise of nationalism, this creed changed into activist political Zionism, although traditional and conservative religious circles resisted this change. In the oral narratives of Central and East European Jewish communities, these dilemmas inevitably involve or touch upon those of living among other nations and communities. Therefore, in the oral lore of Jews of Carpatho-Russia in inter-war eastern Czechoslovakia (presently the western part of Ukraine), narratives about the life of Jews in exile present intricate and at times surprising notions about coping with the new political borders following World War I, the symbiotic yet stressful life with both Ruthenians and Hungarians, the abrupt ending of Jewish life in this area in World War II and the Holocaust, and its memory amongst contemporary Israelis coming from the region. Rosen's article is best read together with her "Rescue Narratives and Conceptualizations by Holocaust Survivors from Carpatho-Russia" published in the volume *Comparative Central European Holocaust Studies*.

Rachel Feldhay Brenner's article "'Ideologically Incorrect' Responses to the Holocaust by Three Israeli Women Writers" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/9>> is a departure from the accepted literary response to the Holocaust in the works of three Israeli women writers and Feldhay Brenner analyzes the play *Lady of the Castle* (1954) by Lea Goldberg (1911-1970), Ruth Almog's (1936-) novel *Exile* (1971), and Shulamith Hareven's (1930-2003) short stories "The Witness" and "Twilight" (1980). While the writers recognized the historical bonds of the European destruction and the Zionist Jewish revival, their literary responses deviated from the mainstream which tended to concur with contemporaneous ideological positions. Feldhay Brenner begins with a brief overview of the three stages in the Zionist understanding of the Holocaust and of the reflections of these stages in the literary canon. Her discussion then proceeds with an examination of the texts by Goldberg, Almog, and Hareven which deviated from the socio-ideological consensus and concludes with a brief discussion of gender signification of dissenting positions.

Louise O. Vasvári catalogues in her "Introduction to and Bibliography of Central European Women's Holocaust Testimonial Literature" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/10>> some four hundred memoirs written by female survivors, as well as some bystanders, the great majority of whom were not professional writers and indeed never published anything besides their memoir, and that often in old age. Ironically, if literary memoirs have sometimes been criticized as too literary, the writings by most of the writers in Vasvári's study have been simply ignored, in part because women's writing has been consistently understudied, but also because they have been dismissed as too subliterary to merit critical consideration -- as Vasvári elaborates in her introduction to the bibliography.

The thematic issue at hand is completed with an extensive "Bibliography for Work in Holocaust Studies" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/11>> compiled by Agata Lisiak, Louise O. Vasvári, and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek.

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